

Integrating Postsecondary Education Interventions to Help Low-Income Students Succeed

Testimony of Alexander Mayer, Deputy Director, Postsecondary Education, MDRC, Before the California State Assembly Higher Education Committee and the Budget Subcommittee on Education Finance

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Thank you, Chair Medina, Chair McCarty, and Members of the Assembly. My name is Alex Mayer, and I am the Deputy Director for Postsecondary Education at MDRC. MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization. We are dedicated to finding what works to improve the lives of low-income people. In Postsecondary Education, we evaluate existing programs and help develop and test new programs that are informed by research. We have offices in both Oakland and Los Angeles, and we've tested many programs in California, including a statewide scholarship program.

There are three points that I want to emphasize from our research:

1. First, short-term interventions tend to have modest, short-term effects. While this means they sometimes fall short of long-term goals, the findings provide lessons to build on, and many of the programs are helping students advance while the programs are operating.
2. Second, it is possible to dramatically improve student outcomes.
3. Third, combining and integrating multiple evidence-based strategies to address multiple factors can be highly effective.

Most of the findings I'm going to discuss are from randomized controlled trials. In a randomized controlled trial, students are randomly assigned by lottery either to a new or untested program or to a control group. Students in the control group cannot participate in the program, but they do have access to all other services. Randomized controlled trials are the gold standard of evaluation research. They are the same method used in clinical trials to evaluate new medical treatments.

MDRC has evaluated a variety of programs across the country. These include financial aid programs like performance-based scholarships, as well as learning communities, enhanced student services like additional advising and student success seminars, instructional reforms, behavioral interventions, and comprehensive programs that combine multiple strategies. When we look across these studies, **we find that short-term programs that last for one or two semesters generally produce modest, short-term results. When several of these programs are combined into an integrated strategy, though, and when students experience them semester after semester, the total effect can be dramatic.** The most effective program we've studied is the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, known as ASAP, a three-year community college program.

ASAP integrates multiple strategies. It requires students to enroll full time and it supports them with tuition waivers, textbook vouchers, and free MetroCards for unlimited use on public transportation. ASAP also provides comprehensive support services such as frequent, proactive advising; career development; and tutoring. **ASAP is both an opportunity and an obligation for students.** In order to receive the MetroCards and other benefits, students must meet with their advisors twice a month and satisfy other program requirements. MDRC's evaluation — based on a sample of students who were all identified as needing remedial education — found that ASAP nearly doubled CUNY's three-year graduation rate, increasing it from 22 percent to 40 percent.

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Given the strength of the findings, CUNY and MDRC partnered to bring the ASAP model to other states. Three colleges in Ohio have now replicated the program, and the early results are very promising. By just the second semester, the program increased enrollment by 12 percentage points and increased full-time enrollment by 24 percentage points on average. Students are also earning more credits. These results align with what we observed at a similar time-point in the ASAP program at CUNY. We are now working with two other colleges to implement ASAP, including Skyline Community College in California.

Apart from ASAP, we have been working with the Detroit Chamber of Commerce, which administers the Detroit Promise program. Detroit Promise covers tuition and fees for Detroit public high school graduates. Although the Promise program helps Detroit's students enroll in college, too few stay in school and graduate. To improve academic outcomes, the Chamber and MDRC partnered to add four enhancements to the existing scholarship program:

1. Campus coaches who help students navigate academic and personal issues
2. Modest financial support for expenses, contingent on meeting with coaches twice a month
3. Behavioral messages to encourage summer enrollment
4. A management information system that tracks student participation and can be used to send messages to students

By just the second semester of the program, the combined package of supports had large effects. It increased enrollment by 11 percentage points and increased full-time enrollment by 15 percentage points. MDRC is now expanding its work with Promise programs. We are currently providing technical assistance to five other programs across the country, including two in California — the Los Angeles College Promise and the Richmond Promise.

Financing and scaling up strategies like these can be difficult. Data and management information systems can help and can lead to efficiencies. They can be used to monitor student participation and automate messaging, freeing up staff time for more challenging student needs.

Even the most successful programs leave many students without good academic outcomes. In CUNY ASAP, for example, 60 percent of the students had not earned a degree after three years. So we are continuing to test new approaches to fill the gaps:

- The Dana Center's Mathematics Pathways in Texas is a major instructional reform of developmental math. Instead of teaching algebra to all students, the program offers statistics and quantitative pathways that align with students' majors. Instructors also avoid lecturing, and focus on more interactive forms of student learning. The early results are promising.
- We are testing behavioral strategies and incentives to increase student progress during the summer at 10 colleges in Ohio, and a text messaging strategy to increase postsecondary enrollment among low-income adults at 18 Educational Opportunity Centers across the country.
- We are collaborating with the California Community College Chancellor's Office to investigate promising strategies at Hispanic Serving Institutions.

A key lesson is that combining and integrating multiple strategies to address multiple factors can be highly effective. As California revisits its postsecondary plan to dramatically improve college completion and considers the consolidation of existing programs, there is a great opportunity to integrate resources and align them around evidence.